SHALL UNIVERSITIES AT THE UAE CONTINUE DISTANCE LEARNING AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC? REVEALING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Nasser A. Saif Almuraqab

Dubai Business School, University of Dubai, UAE
Email: Nasser.Almuraqab@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to reveal universities students' perspective and understand their preferences on distance learning, due to the change happened on education process as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and universities lockdown. This shift in education from traditional classroom learning to distance learning might be one of the largest educational experiments to date. As the online learning process has become more prevalent in UAE due to COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes particularly important to understand students' experiences, and most important revealing their perspective and preferences. This research was therefore designed to understand the student's perspective, challenges, and attitudes about distance learning being conducted at the University. The study employed a descriptive survey. The data was collected using online questionnaire. The present study was carried out amongst students at University of Dubai. Using simple random sampling technique for the study, 133 responses were collected. The results showed that 55% of the students liked distance learning. The analysis revealed 26% would like to study 100% online, while majority of students 49% are in favor of studying through blended learning system which is combination of online and in-class, therefore, Ministry of Education should develop certain rules and guidelines wherein universities are urged to continue offering blended learning system.

Keywords: UAE, COVID-19, Distance learning, Online learning, Universities, Education

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Shall Universities at the UAE Continue Distance Learning After the COVID-19 Pandemic? Revealing Students' Perspective

1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak affected people's life worldwide in 2020, and the disease is highly infections in nature (WHO.int, 2020). As this disease is highly infections and contagious, it can be transmitted among people via respiratory droplets and other contact routes such as hands, nose, and mouth (Liu et al., 2020). Similar to other sectors, this pandemic affected education process. Thus, governments decisions have targeted the mutual goal of hindering the spread of COVID-19 by maintaining social distance, and avoiding face-to-face interaction likewise teaching (www.u.ae government portal). As a result, classes shifted from classical classroom environment to online or virtual using the relevant technologies. Some countries broadcasted exceptional breaks to buy more time for better preparation for distance learning scenario. The start and end dates of the academic year, as well as holidays, are diverse in each country, consequently the situation was not consistent (MOE.gov.ae, 2020). Whereas some countries postponed in-person classes from March/April 2020 until further notice.

At the UAE, universities were constructed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to reduce going to the campus and stop in-class teaching and replacing it with distance learning systems. First, the MOE announced the two-week spring break, which was supposed to start on March 29, will be moved forward. Students will then learn from home for the next two weeks. And after that, MOE has decided to continue distance learning until the end of the academic year 2019-2020 (MOE.gov.ae, 2020).

On the other side of distance learning, although there are many solutions available for distance learning (Rodrigues H, et al., 2019), but assessments might be the most challenging part to be adapted to distance learning. In fact, many universities were concerned about how to evaluate and assess students' learning objectives with integrity and fairness. The consequences of universities lockdown possibly extending to the end of the academic year rises questions concerning grading and assessment of progress that swiftly became an important policy challenge. Fortuitously, MOE (Ministry of Education) circulated rules and regulations, to be used as guidelines for the whole universities at the UAE addressing all the issues and inquiries raised by the universities.

The objective of this article is to reveal students' perspective and understand their overall feeling and then highlight their feedback on the distance learning system during the pandemic of COVID-19, as well as to expose their preferences whether to continue the distance learning or not. This will help to suggest ways of mitigating their preferences and feedback in distance learning system in subsequent outbreaks, and to improve the online learning system in higher education at the UAE, and its related decisions and investments. For the purpose of this paper, the terms online learning and distance learning are used interchangeably.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employed the descriptive survey design using the quantitative research approach. The study was carried out at University of Dubai as a case study, with an estimated population of 935 registered students according to the registration department. The online questionnaire sent to the whole students at the university. Using an online tool was very effective option to reach the students since the outbreak did not permit physical contact.

2.1. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The researcher employed the use of simple random sampling to allocate the sample for study. A total sample size was made up of 133 students, more than 10% of the population, which is adequate for statistical analysis (Bullen and Brack, 2013). In addition, to assert that simple

random sampling enables researchers to ensure that all participants (students) had equal chances of being selected for the study Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2008).

2.2. Research Instruments

Structured questionnaire was constructed and used as the research instruments for collecting the data. It comprised three sections, the first introduced the topic and its objectives, the second contained simple demographic questions (age, gender, city, degree, and college), the last part included nine items drawn from relevant studies. The questionnaire was made up of close-ended items for the students to respond to. Close-ended questions according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2008) are quick to compile and straight forward to code, and do not discriminate excessively on the basis of how articulate the respondents are. The five Likert scale (1932) ranged from Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N) Disagree (D) to Strongly Disagree (SD). According to Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh (2002), the Likert scale is one of the most widely used techniques to measure for descriptive survey studies.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

The researcher used Microsoft forms to design the questionnaire and shared it via email to all students at the university. The researcher therefore used a simple random sampling technique, where every student has an even chance and likelihood of being selected in the sample.

3. RESULTS ANALYSIS

During the study period, a total of 133 students participated in the survey. Out of the entire study population 63 (47%) were males, and 70 (53%) were females, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic details

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	63	47%
Female	70	53%
Age		
18-24	86	65%
25-31	28	21%
32-38	13	10%
39-45	6	5%
Working		
Yes	68	51%
No	65	49%
College		
Dubai Business School	88	66%
College of Eng. And IT	41	31%
Law	4	3%
Degree		
Undergraduate	91	68%
Master's	37	28%
Ph.D.	5	4%

The study population was the students enrolled in various courses at University of Dubai during Spring 2020. Majority of the students 86 were from the age group of 18-24 years (65%), followed by 28 students belonging to 25-31 years (21%), as shown in Table 1.

Majority of students were from Undergraduate (68%) and graduates (Master's & PhD) were (32%). The students were from various colleges highest being from the Dubai Business School (66%), followed by College of Engineering and IT (31%), and Law (3%).

Table 2 below, presents the feedback and challenges of the students during the lockdown of the universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2 Respondents' answers

Survey Statement	SA F %	A F %	N F %	D F %	SD F %
1- I am able to study effectively online	31 (23.3%)	31 (23.3%)	38 (26.6%)	12 (9%)	21 (15.8%)
2- Distance learning makes it difficult sometimes to get explanation due to face to face interaction limitation	44 (33.1%)	37 (27.8%)	22 (16.5%)	22 (16.5%)	8 (6%)
3- I have internet access, and I am able to learn remotely using any device	57 (42.9%)	42 (31.6%)	22 (16.5%)	10 (7.5%)	2 (1.5%)
4- The distance learning is very effective, due to location flexibility	33 (24.8%)	40 (30.1%)	35 (26.3%)	20 (15%)	5 (3.8%)
5- I don't have distance learning technological resources at home (PC, laptop, camera)	3 (2.3%)	18 (13.5%)	18 (13.5%)	41 (30.8%)	53 (39.8%)
6- Due to distance learning, meeting/working with friends became very limited	45 (33.8%)	32 (24.1%)	36 (27.1%)	12 (9%)	8 (6%)
7- Distance learning saves time and effort to reach the campus	54 (40.6%)	29 (21.8%)	32 (24.1%)	10 (7.5%)	8 (6%)
8- I don't have internet access	2 (1.5%)	6 (4.5%)	15 (11.3%)	40 (30.1%)	70 (52.6%)
- Overall did you like the distance learning?	Yes 73 (55%) No 60 (45%)				
- Would you like to continue the distance learning in future?	Yes, I want 100% online 35 (26%) Yes, but blended (in-class and online) 65 (49%) No, I like in-class learning 33 (25%)				

From Table 2 above, 62 (46.6%) of the respondents agreed of being able to learn effectively online while 33 (24.8%) respondents disagreed to that statement. Again, in respect to getting to understand topics/subjects when having individual studies in the house, 81 (60.9%) respondents agreed that getting understanding of concepts during individual studies is challenging due to face to face limitation as compared to learning in groups and with the teacher around. However, 30 (22.5%) respondents disagreed.

Also 99 (74.5%) respondents gave positive answer to the statement that they have internet access, and they are able to use any device for online learning while few of them 12 (9%) respondents disagreed to the statement. 73 (54.9%) of the respondents agreed that the online

system of learning is very effective due to location flexibility, thus will help many students attending the class from anywhere, while 25 (18.8%) disagreed. Regarding the technological resources for i.e. (Laptop, PC, Tablet) 94 (70.6%) of the respondents disagreed that having issues with technological resources availability at home, while some of the students 21 (15.8%) don't have some/all of these technological resources at home.

Furthermore, 77 (57.9%) agreed that distance learning made group collaboration among students less and very limited while 20 (15%) disagreed. In addition, 83 (62.4%) of the respondents agreed that online learning saved time and effort to drive to campus and they found it more convenient to study anywhere rather than driving, while 18 (13.5%) disagree. Finally, 110 (82.7%) responded disagreed to unavailability of the internet access but 8 (6%) respondents agreed to not having internet access.

4. DISCUSSION

Many countries have successfully slowed down the spread of the coronavirus taking drastic measures which included banning public gatherings and lockdown of universities till further notice. Although universities closure is an effective way of minimizing the spread of the virus, it has come with its own challenges especially in developing countries such as UAE. Ministry of Education and collaborating with universities, provided excellent overall rules and regulations to adhere the mandate of the country leaders in order to ensure the continuity of the education process at the country, plus the excellent infrastructure of the country played an active role to facilitate the online/distance learning process. Thus, learning alone in the house for university's students has been proven to be effective as the learner has technological resources and internet access at home. Because distance learning gives a big advantage to students as they can study anywhere, they want with a few exceptions. (Carnevale, 2000; Dutton et al., 2002). And, transferring the knowledge from one person to other(s) whether via online or in-class are similar, but the communication method is different. In fact, (Lantolf, 2008; Bateman & Waters, 2013; Greenberg, 2005) said that teaching occurs when a more knowledgeable person passes on knowledge to a less knowledgeable individual in order to induce a relatively permanent change in behavior.

Some of the respondents asserted to the fact that the online learning rolled out by the Ministry as well as universities is very effective, but the accessibility has been the issue since you will need technological devices such as the smart phones or the computer and the internet to be able to access it. This has made learning in the house during this pandemic very challenging to them. It is also said that learning is effectively achieved when the right instructional materials are used for the right purpose during the process. For those who have issue either on internet access or technological resources, the government did extra mile to support them all with gadgets (Sebugwaawo, 2020), to enhance every home to have an adequate learning environment, however, some students are living in small apartments hence students are therefore obliged to learn either in the living room or their bedrooms which is very ineffective as stated by the respondents. That's why the involvement of the family (parents) is important, as per García and Thornton (2014), the involvement of family in learning, supports to improve students' performance, reduce absence and reestablish parents' assurance in their children's' education.

In the midst of pandemic where students stay out of university, majority of learning institutions resort to online learning which substitute the normal contact with the teacher in a physical classroom to a virtual classroom via the use of the internet and technological devices such as the smartphones, computers and tablets. However, teachers were supposed to get trained on how to make the distance learning experience more interactive, it was argued by (McLeod, 2019; Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2000) that learning is highly achieved when

students are made to interact with instructional materials and draw their own meaning from their interaction. Also, it was claimed that students learn well when they are supervised and guided (Okendu, 2012). However, in campus there are many hands-on activities elevate students' knowledge such as labs and it will help understating subjects (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). These aspects will be missing on the distance learning during the pandemic although students will learn but getting the right explanation will be a challenge to them especially with the new concepts and specially if hands-on is required.

The study revealed that majority of households in UAE do have internet access, due to the strong infrastructure at the country, which had led to an online learning platform rolled out by the Ministry of Education and universities at UAE being straight forward because majority of the students do have technological resources and access to internet. Those who don't have access, the government provided them with free internet access via the ISP providers Etisalat and Du (Alshouk, 2020).

It is undoubtedly true that most students agreed that due to the limitation of the face to face interaction because of the online learning system sometimes it is difficult to get proper explanation of some materials, and this might be as a result of faculty members insufficient adoption and adaptation to the distance learning, since it happened suddenly as a reaction to the pandemic, without a proper and insufficient training. This has made learning of some concepts especially those perceived to be abstract very difficult for the students in this period of lockdown and universities closure. In addition, it is noteworthy, regarding the assessment, which is one of the most challenging items, the current technology is not mature yet, to ensure the integrity and credibility by 100%, because there is always way(s) to trick these systems. In fact, the current assessments were designed initially for in-class environment, therefore, universities are highly encouraged to innovate new ways aligned with distance learning environment, to assess their students' knowledge, keeping in consideration the technology limitations.

Finally, and most important, the study revealed that most of the university students 55% liked the online learning system, and 45% didn't like it. Additionally, 49% agreed to have blended learning system (mix of online and in-class) rather than just online by 26% or in-class by 25%. In other words, and after this pandemic, it is highly recommended for universities at the UAE, to shift from traditional classroom environment to blended learning system which is combining in-class leaning and distance learning as per students' preferences.

5. CONCLUSION

In the wake of the worldwide pandemic, covid-19, most of the world's institutions have been affected ranging from economy, industries, religion and education among others. This study examined the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on learning among UAE University students and revealed their perspective and preferences. Although majority of students liked the distance learning, and would like to have blended learning system, it came to light that the pandemic has had a psychologic negative impact on their learning as many of them are not used to effectively learning by themselves, setting all the time at home, due to the curfew, as they used to study in the class with their friends. The distance learning platforms rolled out also was challenging to some of the students because of the limited access to internet and lack of the technical technological devices. The study therefore recommends that students and teachers alike be re-introduced to online learning platforms to enhance the adoption, and how to effectively use it for instructional practice in the wake of such challenges in our educational system, and adapt the pedagogy accordingly, to more effective knowledge transferring. The outcome of this study will go a long way in helping policy makers to come out with a lasting

policy to address challenges faced by students when they are home for their normal semester break or during a pandemic of this nature.

6. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations. Regarding the research sample used, it was from one university, which is modest to represent the whole universities at the UAE. So, this may not very accurate in representing students' perspective and preferences about the distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which leaves future researchers to examine more universities at the UAE, to discover more insights on distance learning during the breakout of coronavirus. Furthermore, the students' performance aspects for i.e. (GPA/CGPA) were not covered; these could be exposed in future to examine the system effectiveness by comparing students' performance pre and post distance learning.

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